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ABSTRACT

In fiscal year 1987, approximately 12,000 inmates, or 29 percent of the 44,000 incarcerated adults at least 18 years old, enrolled in adult basic education (ABE) programs. Six thousand five hundred completed their programs. Another 3,500 enrolled in the General Educational Development (GED) program and 2,800 received diplomas. All inmates who enter the federal prison system must take the Adult Basic Level Examination (ABLE). All inmates whose score on any subtest is below the 8.0 grade level must enter ABE for 90 days. During that time, they must attend at least 2 hours per day, unless they have only one subtest to remediate. Inmates who complete the 90-day period may choose to drop out of school. However, only inmates who have obtained their ABE credential can be paid more than entry-level pay grades in any industry or institutional work detail. The teaching staff encourage inmates to remain in school until they finish. Handicapped learners are exempted from the 8.0 grade-level performance requirement for promotion and can instead be promoted after demonstrating sustained effort, remaining in school to work to their potential for an agreed-upon amount of time, and receiving a recommendation from their work supervisor. The ABE program receives top priority within the school and is one of only two mandatory programs within the Bureau of Prisons. The other mandatory program is work. The total budget for all education programs, including ABE, GED, vocational training, recreation, postsecondary, social education, and leisure time is approximately $25 million. That includes salaries, contracts, equipment, and operating costs. (The document also includes answers to such questions as the following: Who is learning to read and how is that measured? How are teachers trained to assess student progress? What has been the biggest problem with assessment procedures? and What is best for motivating students? Also included are two references.) (CML)

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FEDERAL PRISON SYSTEM
READING PROGRAMS
AUGUST 22, 1988

A PAPER FOR:

THE NATIONAL ADULT LITERACY SYMPOSIUM
SEPTEMBER 8, 1988

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Federal Prison System
Reading Programs
August 22, 1988*

A Brief Description of Our Program

The Federal Prison System incarcerates approximately 44,000 adults, ages 18 and older. Approximately 7% of the population is female, 66% is white, 31% black, 3% American Indian and other. Approximately 25% of the population is of Hispanic origin[1]. The average sentence is approximately 34 months; the average actual timed served is 15.6 months[1].

In Fiscal Year (FY) 1987 approximately 12,000 inmates, or 29% of the inmate population enrolled in Adult Basic Education programs and 6500 completed. Another 3500 enrolled in the General Equivalency Diploma (GED) program and 2800 sucessfully achieved their diplomas. An estimated 350 civil service education staff and 150 contract teachers are employed in 47 federal institutions throughout the country.

Students are placed in Adult Basic Education (ABE) in the following way. All inmates who enter the system must take the Adult Basic Level Examination (ABLE). If any subtest scores (reading comprehension,

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vocabulary, language, math computation, math applications and spelling) are below the 8.0 grade level, the inmate must enter ABE for a period of 90 days. ABE students must attend at least 2 hours/day, unless they have only one subtest to remediate.

Students who complete the 90 day mandatory period may choose to drop out of school. However, no inmate can get paid above entry level pay grades in any industry or institution work detail position, unless the ABE credential has been obtained. An inmate completes the ABE program when all six subtests of the ABLE are passed at the 8.0 grade level.

Once inmates arrive in ABE, the teaching staff encourage them to remain in school until they finish. Often, the pre-GED test is administered to the completing student in order to bridge the transition into the GED program. We have found that when a person has achieved 8.0 on all subtests of the ABLE, the amount of time it takes to prepare for the official GED test is substantially reduced- often to three months or less.

Provisions are made for the handicapped learner, particularly the slow learner and the learning disabled, so that they are exempted from the mandatory 8.0 requirement for work-grade promotion. Usually exemptees have to satisfy the following three requirements:

(1) demonstrate sustained effort (normally for two-three months beyond the 90 day requirement)

(2) remain in school to work to their potential for

an agreed-upon minimum amount of time per week (usually at least an hour/day)

(3) is recommended by the work supervisor for a promotion.

In this way special need students are not prevented from excelling at work, while they develop remedial learning skills and strategies.

The ABE program recieves top priority within the school and is one of only two mandatory programs within the Bureau of Prisons -the other is work. Each institution, by policy, must make "every effort" to secure at least one teacher with an MA in reading or special education. ABE classes have a ratio of 1:10, minimum, 1:15 maximum. GED guidelines are 1:15 and 1:20. Special classes, such as compensatory education can have lower ratios.

The total budget for all education programs, including ABE, GED, vocational training, recreation, post-secondary, social education and leisure time is approximately $25 million (this includes salaries and contract monies as well as equipment and operating costs).

Questions

#1. Who's learning to read and how do we know?

The number and percent of inmates who enroll and complete ABE has increased steadily since 1982. It was in 1982 that the first "mandatory ABE" program was implemented. At that time the completion standard was a 6.0 battery median on the Stanford Achievement Test (SAT). The following year

the completion standard was raised to 6.0 scores on all eight SAT subtests.

After one year of the mandatory ABE policy, the Bureau of Prisons experienced a 62% increase in enrollments and a 90% increase in completions: from 3,785 enrollments and 1,983 completions in 1982, to 6,004 enrollments and 3,774 completions in 1983.

In 1986, the ABE completion standard again was raised, from 6.0 in all subtests, to 8.0 in all subtests on the SAT. In 1987 enrollments in ABE were 12,000 and completions were approximately 6500.

GED enrollments and completions similarly expanded over the same period, from FY 1982 to FY 1987. The following tables compare the enrollment and completion data for ABE and GED:

FEDERAL PRISON SYSTEM
ABE PROGRAM

FISCAL YEAR	NEW ENROLLMENTS	COMPLETIONS	COMMENTS
1981	2653	1441	
1982	3785	1983	6.0 POLICY
1983	6004	3774	
1984	6896	4909	
1985	8048	5221	
1986	11471	5329	8.0 POLICY
1987	12000 (est)	6500 (est)	

FEDERAL PRISON SYSTEM
GED PROGRAM

FISCAL YEAR	TESTS ADMINISTERED	TESTS PASSED
1981	2395	2101
1982	2676	2096
1983	2772	2303
1984	3607	2821
1985	3672	2913
1986	3900	3028
1987	4264	3258

The average length of time in the ABE program was estimated at 100 hours/completion in 1986.

As was stated in the introduction, inmates are tested when they first arrive at the institution. A complete set of SAT or ABLE scores must be kept for each inmate. The supervisor of education can ask for an inmate to retest if there is reason to believe that the scores are not valid or if they are outdated or incomplete.

ABE students may retest when it is mutually agreed upon by the students and the instructor that they are ready. Testing in ABE is normally conducted on a weekly basis, so that a student knows that there will be frequent opportunities to retest. Often students will retest in one or more subtests even if they are not ready in other areas. This is especially so for slower learners who may need to concentrate on one area at a time.

#2. How do you train teachers to assess student progress?

The Psychological Corporation recently concluded training for test administrators and ABE teachers from most of the institutions in the BOP. On July 1, 1988, the Adult Basic Learning Test (ABLE) became the new standard for placement in ABE. By policy, all test administrators must receive testing in-service training at least every three years. Problems with centralized training in diagnostic assessment will be discussed in question #4.

#3. What has worked best for you in your assessment procedure?

The typical BOP school tests thirty or more students weekly. Having one person responsible for all ABLE testing has the following advantages. First, the test administrator (TA) is not an ABE teacher, thereby removing bias and conflicts of interests. The TA is an impartial proctor. Secondly, one TA can most efficiently control and secure all testing materials, and coordinate all data and correspondence with the classroom teachers and office technicians. In an environment where test security and accurate data are critical, good test control is the "hub" of the program.

#4. What has been the biggest problem with assessment procedure?

The biggest problem with assessment training is associated with the overall design of the ABE curriculum. Each institution has the latitutde to develop its own ABE curriculum, based on broadly defined curriculum goals developed by the central office2. Because diagnostic assessment is an integral part of the curriculum itself, it is difficult to provide centralized training in specific diagnostic assessment techniques and stategies. Also, many BOP teachers have entered correctional education in order to get away from the rigid constraints of centralized curriculum. The move to centralize even a portion of the ABE curriculum remains controversial.

#5. What is best at motivating the students?

There is a multiplicity of motivational strategies and incentive programs in BOP schools, such as graduation ceremonies, honor societies, cash and other awards, certificates, peer support and tutoring, student of the month recognitions, etc. However, the single most influential tool has been the mandatory ABE policy itself. If the teachers did not have the 90 days to try out various incentives with students, many powerful incentives would never have a chance to work. In addition, the mandatory policy has the advantage of aligning the other prison staff with education. This is no minor accomplishment in an environment not noted for its enthusiasm for inmate programming.

#6. How do you find out what the student wants to accomplish?

Counselling and mutual goal setting are regular parts of the ABE program. Often teachers set up weekly or bi-weekly learning goals and progress reviews. Policy states that a conference and progress interview must be conducted at least every 30 days with each student in ABE.

#7. What effect does information gained from assessment have on the program?

On the local level diagnostic assessments assist the teacher in adjusting the student's intermittent learning goals. On the national level, we are currently reviewing data on student learning rates and length of time in ABE in light of the extension of ABE from 6.0 to 8.0. Plans are made to consolidate staff and reorder priorities to meet the extended demands of the academic program, to eliminate ABE waiting lists and to restructure the GED program.

#8. What do you do to follow up on students?

Most schools assign education advisors to the inmates' 90 day review team. At this meeting inmates' past programming (including educational programming) is reviewed, as well as their future goals. In addition, many schools send out notices, use peer recruitment and schedule promotionals

to encourage drop-outs to return to school. Once inmates leave the prison system there is, unfortunately, no follow up between students and school.

#9. How do you link up with local support groups?

The two most frequently recruited outside support groups are Laubach Literacy International and Literacy Volunteers of America. There is very little formal evaluation of the grade level advancements made by students served by these organizations. However, the enthusiasm for inmate-run literacy councils remains very high, as is reflected in consistent membership renewal in the voluntary organizations. Furthermore, the pro-educational posture of the inmate peer group has a general carry-over to the formal ABE program.

#10. What is planned for student assessment in the future?

The BOP implemented a new standardized placement test, the ABLE, in July, 1988. Plans for improvements in diagnostic assessment center on the development of a "skills core" ABE curriculum that targets the skills assessed in the ABLE. This core would not remove other curriculum development responsibilities from the ABE teachers, in areas such as critical thinking skills, comprehension, reference skills, survival skills, special education, compensatory education and enrichment. However,

by sharing a skills core curriculum, BOP schools can improve the continuity of services to inmates transferred within the Bureau. This will also allow us to provide unilateral training in specific diagnostic assessment techniques and strategies related to the skills core.

REFERENCES

1. Statistical Report Fiscal Year 1986 , U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Prisons , December, 1987

2. Curriculum Performance Standards, Adult Basic Education, U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Prisons, July, 1982